

## SEVEN LIVELY VIRTUES

### (2) KNOWLEDGE

2 Peter 1: 1-8

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#### SCRIPTURE

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: {2} May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. {3} His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. {4} Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. {5} For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, {6} and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, {7} and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. {8} For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:1-8 NRSV).

#### INTRODUCTION

Virtue is not a high-demand topic these days and even when it is mentioned is often misunderstood. An unpopular ethics professor asked his class, "If I saw a man beating a donkey and stopped him, what virtue would I be showing?" A student from the back said, "Brotherly love."

Socrates said, "virtue is knowledge." By that he meant, "Either you know what to do or you don't know what to do and if you don't know what to do then too bad!" The Apostle Peter reversed that and said, "knowledge is virtue." By that he meant, "Anyone with a humble trust in God, whether a rocket scientist or someone who never made it pass the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, can learn how to live a life that pleases God.

#### 1. APPROACHES TO VIRTUE

Throughout history there have been basically three different ways of looking at virtue: the philosophical approach, the religious approach, and the redemptive approach. Philosophers like Aristotle of Greece and Confucius of China defined virtue as a character trait that is valued not only because it benefits the individual who practices it but also because, and especially because, it benefits the society in which such individuals are found. Whenever virtue is discussed in America, it is usually this definition that is being used. From Benjamin Franklin (*Poor Richard's Almanac*) to William Bennett (*The Book of Virtues*), the practice of virtue is seen as a core responsibility of good citizens.

The religious approach is less interested in what benefits society and more interested in finding ways to get God to “cough up the goods.” Please understand that while the word “religious” can be used in a good way but I am using it here in a negative way. And by religious approach I do not mean that all religions teach this but that there are certain types of people within most religions that see virtue as a means to a selfish end, that is, putting God in our debt so that God has to give us what we want. The concept is ludicrous – God can never be in debt to us. But this does not keep people, including many church people, from believing it.

The redemptive approach sees the practice of virtue as evidence that we have been redeemed by God. It is a way of expressing our thanks to God for what God has done for us. It is also a way of making our lives available for God’s purposes.

## **2. THE GOAL OF FAITH**

Peter uses the redemptive approach to virtue. I do not think he would deny that virtue can benefit society. And surely any society that ceases to promote virtue is headed for big trouble. But he would argue that trying to practice virtue by willpower alone will not succeed. We need God’s power. This is why he connects virtue with faith.

For Peter, living a virtuous life is another way of saying living a Christ-like life. Practicing Christ-like virtues makes real the work of God in our lives. And so he says:

“Make every effort to support your faith with...knowledge” (5).

## **3. SECOND VIRTUE: KNOWLEDGE**

The second of the "Seven Lively Virtues" is knowledge. This is not the same as the saving knowledge (*epignosis*) mentioned earlier in the letter:

May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord (2 Peter 1:2 NRSV).

This is called "saving knowledge" because it refers to the gift of salvation that comes from knowing God through faith in Jesus Christ. It is one thing to know a few facts *about* God and quite another to actually *know* God in a loving, ongoing relationship.

Now verse 5 also uses the English word "knowledge" but the original Greek is a slightly different term. Here it refers to practical knowledge for the life of faith.

People of faith often ask the question, “How can I know the will of God?” The answer is surprisingly simple - You can’t! (Or at least there is a great deal we cannot know.) Moses gave this counsel to a new generation who were about to enter a new land:

“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to observe all the words of [the] law” (Deut 29:29)

NRSV).

We cannot know the secret or hidden will of God. Theologians call this the decretive will of God. (Personally, I do not like the word decretive because it is hard to pronounce and sounds like some sort of liquid escaping from the body!) God *decrees* or commands things to happen and they happen. God is in charge of the universe and is not in the habit of consulting us as to how to do his job. God also permits things to happen but he *chooses* to permit them to happen and so in that sense it is still the will of God. The search for the secret will of God is a fool's errand and a waste of time. It remains hidden to us until it comes to pass.

Moses spoke of another aspect of the will of God that we *can* know because it has been revealed to us. Theologians call this the preceptive will of God. Unlike the decrees of God, we have the ability (but not the right) to break the precepts of God. The word "precept" has to do with a commandment or guiding principle. "Do not murder", "love your neighbor as yourself", and "repent and believe the Gospel" are all precepts. These precepts have been revealed to us by God and the record of this is what we call the Scriptures or the Bible. If you want to know the revealed will of God then you need to know the Scriptures.

If I could summarize the preceptive will of God for your life in one word I would use the word "becoming" as in becoming like Christ. Eugene Peterson in his translation of Romans 8:29 puts it this way:

"God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son" (Rom 8:29 TM).

In every life situation the question to ask is, "Am I working to become like Christ?" When I say "like Christ" I do not mean we imitate his appearance and wear tunics and sandals but that we seek to be like him in faith, character and love. To put it another way, what Adam and Eve once were and Jesus now is we are to become. It is to become human in the fullest, most complete sense of the word.

Salvation is a work of God, a free gift to be received by faith. The work of becoming like Christ is a partnership with God and it cannot be done apart from blood, sweat and tears. This may explain why this answer is not very popular.

On more than one occasion people have asked me about the will of God for their life. I point out to them that, for the most part, God's will for them has already been shown in Scripture, particularly the idea of becoming like Christ. I then tell them that this will require sacrifice, hard work and facing adversity. The typical response I get is a blank look and then words to the effect, "Besides all that, I mean. What is God's will for my life?"

What do they expect me to say? "You will win the lottery, marry the person of your dreams and

host your own reality TV show!”

The assumption that is being made is that becoming like Christ, whatever that means, sounds like a joyless, dreary sanctimonious burden that sucks all the zest out of life. And I must admit that the Christian Church has sometimes given this impression. Two men were seated next to each other on a plane. The first turned to the other and said, “Excuse me, but are you a clergyman?” The second replied, “Oh, no. I only look this way because I am just getting over the flu.” American jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, "I might have entered the ministry if certain [clergy] I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers."

But this is not what God has in mind. If it is your heart’s desire to be like Jesus then you will know a love that is deeper, a joy that is higher and a peace that is stronger than anything you can imagine!

Christians are divided as to how specific God’s preceptive will is upon our lives. On the one hand, I knew of a pastor from Wisconsin who whenever he drove into a parking lot would ask God to show him the exact spot he was to park his car. It makes me wonder what he would have done if he found someone else in the spot he believed God wanted him to have!

Two people were vying for the same parking space near the entrance to a shopping mall, a young man in a small sports car and an elderly lady in a Cadillac. The woman was in front of the space first but before she could turn her wheels the man zipped in ahead of her. When he got out he smiled and said, “Oh, to be young and fast!” Several minutes later he returned to find his sports car nearly demolished by repeated bashes from the woman in the Cadillac. She looked at him and smiled, “Oh, to be old and rich!”

On the other hand, there are those who completely dismiss the idea that God would ever direct someone to a specific parking space. They regard this as an affront to the dignity of God and a denial of human freedom.

Now I believe that God can and does at times lead us in specific ways. We see this for example, in the missionary work of Paul as recorded in Acts. However, God would never lead us in a way that contradicts his revealed or preceptive will. (If the choice before you is whether or not to rob a bank, it should not be that difficult to figure out what God wants you to do!) We are to pray for wisdom (James 1:5) and be led by the Spirit (Gal 5:16-24) bearing in mind that these terms refer primarily to the practice of virtue rather than decoding some secret plan. Too many Christians spend too much time fretting needlessly over details, that they miss out on the fulness of life Jesus said he came to bring us (John 10:10).

I think the general thrust of the New Testament is toward freedom - we are free to follow our heart’s desires, provided such freedom is not a license to do wrong. We have been set free from sin so we can be free for service (Gal 5:1,13). The Bible is also clear that we are to use our God-given intelligence. We are to think about the principles taught in Scripture and how to apply them

(2 Tim 2:7). But we cannot think about the principles taught in Scripture if we do not know what they are. We cannot work at becoming like Christ if we lack the knowledge of what it means to be like Christ. We need to grow in our knowledge.

#### **4. APPLICATION**

As I mentioned last week, for each of the Seven Lively Virtues I have a two-fold strategy for application: A Question to ponder, and a Promise to believe. I hope you will take home a copy of the question and think about it during the week. I also hope you will take home the Scripture Reference for the Promise and read it during the week. By believing in the promise you connect to the power of God which brings the virtue to life.

The Question to ponder for Knowledge is:

If you could learn more about one aspect of the Christian life, what would it be?

Of course, as followers of Christ, we always have more to learn. A Christian is meant to be a life-long student. But there may be a specific area where you really feel you need to know more than you know now. Possibilities may include: How to read and understand the Bible. An in-depth look at a specific book in the Bible. The meaning and practice of prayer. Sharing my faith with others. Spiritual gifts and service. Basic Christian beliefs. Faith and finances. World religions. Spiritual disciplines. Understanding worship. Struggling with Doubts. What do Christians believe about the end of the world? And so on.

Please consider writing down the topic on the supplied card and placing it in the offering plate when it is passed (or in some other way get it to the church office). You do not have to put your name on it. By writing down your topic on the card you are accomplishing two things: You are identifying an area that you need to work on in the coming year and you are providing Pat and myself a list of helpful ideas of what needs to be taught in the coming year.

The Promise to believe is found in the Gospel of John. Jesus says:

Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own (John 7:17 NRSV).

When it comes to knowing the will of God for our lives, we would prefer it came ala carte. That way, if we do not like it we can choose another option. But Jesus makes it clear that the will does not work this way. Spiritual knowledge is not gained by learning the options. It depends on our willingness to obey. If you are struggling to find out what has not yet been revealed to you, it may be because you have been unwilling to obey what has been revealed to you. God promises to bless you with assurance according to your willingness to do what he has asked you to do.